



Sweden: Paradise and Paradox

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ANNE MORRISETT

SWEDEN

Paradise and Paradox

It is ironic that at a time when Ingmar Bergman has reached the pages of *Time*, and his films are to be seen in most major American cities, the Swedish film industry has been suffering one of its worst slumps in decades. There is now a television set in every other urban home in Sweden; in 1960 less than twenty films were made by the four major Swedish companies, whereas forty or fifty were being made in the late 'forties; most of the films made in recent years have lost money, despite foreign distribution and the very low cost of producing films in Sweden. During the early 'fifties, ownership of theaters by the film producing companies, and a partial rebate granted by the government from the 25% entertainment tax, helped to offset losses. But today the Swedish film, whose history is an illustrious one for so small a nation, and whose directors and producers have been among the most talented and responsible in the world, faces a most uncertain future. At home it is leaning more and more heavily on the production of light comedies; abroad, especially in the United States, it is leaning on the showing and reshowing of Bergman films.

The first Swedish film to make any headway in the States, in the mid-'forties, was *Torment*, directed by Alf Sjöberg and written by Ingmar Bergman. It was the young Bergman's first chance at a film script, and it brought him the following year (1945) a further offer from Carl Anders Dymling, Svensk Filmindustri's strong-handed chief who just died this year, to direct his own script. This was *Crisis*, based on a

Danish play called *The Mother Animal*. It was poorly received in Sweden, and has never gotten to the United States. Bergman's succeeding films for the next half-dozen years were also poorly or moderately received. [For a critical account of them, and the rest of Bergman's work, see Eugene Archer's article, "The Rack of Life," *Film Quarterly*, Summer, 1959.] Then, in 1953, Bergman was asked by Sandrews, Sweden's second largest production firm, to write and direct his own film. The result, *Gycklarnas Afton*, ran as *The Naked Night* in exploitation houses in New York until the success of *The Seventh Seal* and Bergman's other later works put it into the art theaters; photographed by Sven Nykvist (who also did *The Virgin Spring* and *Through A Glass Darkly* for Bergman), it is now regarded by many people as one of Bergman's best.

The mixed reception of Bergman's efforts in the late 'forties and early 'fifties did not discourage Svensk Filmindustri from continuing to give him a more or less free hand for experimenting. In the next few years this policy resulted in artistically (and later financially) gratifying films such as *Lesson in Love*, *Smiles of a Summer Night*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Wild Strawberries*. When the film industry began to feel the first impact of TV around 1957, Bergman was already so well established that SF was able to let him go on unhampered when no other director could.

Alf Sjöberg's 1960 film, *The Judge*, made for Sandrews, marked the perhaps only temporary return of a leading theater personality of the

past two decades to film production. Although he started in films as early as 1928, directing a silent film called *The Strongest*, for more than a decade afterwards Sjöberg worked only with the Royal Dramatic Theater. Between 1939, when he returned again to film-making, and 1943, he directed four films. Then in 1944 he directed *Torment*. Just as this (and the improving world situation for film-making) had opened up possibilities for Bergman, so it expanded them for the more seasoned Sjöberg. He directed two notable films for SF, *Iris* in 1946, and *Only a Mother* in 1949; then in 1950 he was asked by Sandrews to direct Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, which won the 1951 Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

Sjöberg and Bergman collaborated once again for Svensk Filmindustri, more than ten years after their successful *Torment*. In 1955-56 they put together a "problem" film entitled *Last Pair Out* which was poorly received by critics and audiences; by this time they had apparently gone different ways. With Swedish cinema-going—and consequently production—dropping off, this was the last film Sjöberg directed until 1960.

Like Bergman, Sjöberg seems basically undisturbed by the decreased production of films. Both men feel themselves to be primarily directors of theater, and as Bergman put it to me in a conversation, "The theater is my home: this is where I want to grow old." Bergman has also compared film-making to a demanding and fickle mistress whom he is ever ready to abandon for his faithful wife: theater.

"Film-making," he told me while he was directing *The Sea Gull* at the Royal Dramatic Theater in December, 1960, "makes one bleed too much. It is always exciting, and difficult, and fascinating, but it make one feel hurt, humiliated. I do not think it is a healthy form of artistic work. . . . I am mainly a director of theater." (This does not seem to be quite the way he felt several years earlier, when he wrote "The motion picture and its complicated process of birth are my methods of saying what I want to my fellow man.")

Sjöberg's observations on film-making were less vehement: he likes working in theater and film equally, he told me—but perhaps his actions inadvertently belie his words, because in his thirty-five years of contact with both, he has directed only 15 films, but nearly 150 plays. Also, Sjöberg does not write his own original manuscripts, and it is undoubtedly in this process of dual creation that Bergman does much of his bleeding.

The thing that these two outstanding directors have in common, however, not only with each other but with most of the other directors and actors connected with Swedish film-making, is their theater background: and this is a significant key to the high artistic standards (and occasional over-theatricalization) of the industry. Whereas Hollywood had its roots at least partly in the tradition of vaudeville and circus entertainment, Swedish film-making developed from the efforts of photographers, particularly Charles Magnusson who became head of Svensk Filmindustri, and from adult theater. (It is this, in fact, which now presents it with something of a problem locally in competing with Hollywood, as the largest part of the remaining Swedish movie-goers are teen-agers.)

With few exceptions, Swedish actors and directors of the recent decades have been trained in the dramatic schools and theaters of Stockholm, Malmö, and Gothenburg. Bergman,

Alf Sjöberg's *THE JUDGE (Domaren)*: Ingrid Thulin and Gunnar Hellström.



now directing for the first time at the Royal Dramatic Theater in Stockholm, was from 1953 to 1960 a director at Malmö. This has its practical side, of course, since film-making is almost a seasonal occupation in Sweden, taking place mainly in the summer when there are endless hours of daylight and most of the legitimate theaters are closed. In the winter, when it is dark much of the time, film artists return to the theaters, to occasional radio work, or to rest. A few of them sneak off to television.

Gunnar Björnstrand and Max von Sydow, two of Bergman's most frequently used actors as well as his personal friends, stated quite emphatically in our conversations about television that it was not a medium that interested them. Perhaps for such leading figures there is little to be gained there, but lesser-known actors often feel similarly, and Gunnar Fischer, the excellent cameraman Bergman has used for 13 of his 22 films (including *Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*) told me that he personally felt not at all tempted by work in television. However, a TV director I talked with who formerly worked in films told me that the film companies have actively prevented members of the film community from working in TV, and that he himself is now "blacklisted" mainly for this. (He was one of the few, incidentally, who expressed—or perhaps was willing to express openly—negative views concerning Swedish film production, although the negativeness was largely in regard to the past few years, when he has been working only in TV and claims he has literally been barred from film work.)

Actually even Bergman and Sjöberg have occasionally directed plays for television, and according to TV film commentator Gunnar Oldin, new directors are tending to come to television, especially now when the film industry is so cautious. But on the whole it is looked upon more as a medium of communication than of art, and good directors are more likely to stick with the theater. Dr. Dymling told me before his death that he did not think TV could do the same thing at all that films can: for

the latter, one is in a different mood, different environment, one shares the experience with many others—as in legitimate theater—with darkness and larger proportions adding to one's concentration. As to TV's undercutting of film production, Dr. Dymling appeared not too pessimistic: "I'm glad there are fewer films made now than there used to be," he told me. "We are a small country, we don't have that much talent available. It is better used now." He felt that the film industry's relation to television would become stabilized, was perhaps already doing so, and each would take its proper place. His successor, young director Kenne Fant, seems to share this mild optimism.

But the taxes, and the mounting production costs, and the passing of the "golden years" are all no doubt things that weighed heavily upon Dr. Dymling before he died. One of the grand old men of Swedish film-making, he had a gentleness (as well as stubbornness, I am told) and scholarly dedication to the film as art which perhaps obscured for him the possibility of admitting that there might be others who would go into film-producing largely for material gain. But these qualities were also responsible for his devotion to seeking the best, and his willingness to take risks which was both a cause and result of his having given chances to such strange young rebels as Bergman. Recently Svensk Filmindustri has been trying out two new young directors, and the naming of Kenne Fant as production chief was a surprise move in the apparent direction of revitalization; still, everyone admits that if another Bergman were to turn up now (a new rebel, an innovator), he would never be given the chances that Bergman was given in the 'forties. The present Bergman, now a partial executive in SF, is gentler, perhaps, with more humor and less fire (or with the flames now more concentrated into a cold white heat); but it is always disturbing for an innovator to find himself accepted, and he seems to sit on his pinnacle uneasily and with some skepticism. The fickle mistress has put him up there, and she can cast him down again. His popularity in the

United States, limited though it largely is to art theaters, is one of the reasons for his present freedom to work, yet clearly he cannot afford to let himself care about it. Already his vogue is passé in some European intellectual circles, where articles about Bergman appear acceptable only if they find fault with him. (In a recent issue of *Chaplin*, a highly regarded magazine of Swedish film criticism, a number of attacks on Bergman were topped by one which was revealed in a subsequent issue to have been written by Bergman himself.) But with the cynical light touch of such recent films as *The Devil's Eye*, and with a technicolor "rococco" film now planned, Bergman's apparent departure from problems of life and death and heavier symbolism may not prove to be the best turn for him either. It is understandable that he takes refuge in the faithful theater; but it is more than refuge, too, since in Sweden theater is also the film's life-blood.

A kind of throwback in this theatrical family picture is photographer-director Arne Sucksdorff. I use the term photographer in its best sense, for there is no question Sucksdorff is an artist with the camera, supremely sensitive to the forms and pulse of nature. Obsessed by the shapes and shadows and movements of its relentless, rhythmical struggles, Sucksdorff (now in his early forties, like Bergman) has for some twenty years captured the world of nature and animals in hundreds of thousands of film meters, only a small proportion of which are seen by his audiences. He is known as one of the most perfectionist and extravagant of film-makers, and until recently has almost always been his own writer, director, cameraman, and editor. Originally he was even his own financier (he comes from a wealthy Swedish family), but after his fourth short film, *A Summer's Tale*, made in 1940 and sold to Svensk Filmindustri for distribution, he was taken on SF's payroll.

Up to 1951 Sucksdorff made 17 short documentaries, most of them exquisitely savage yet gentle odes to nature, with the exception of several later shorts such as *Rhythm of a City*

(a film about Stockholm for which he received an Oscar) in which he began tentatively to explore human constructions and activities—and even the faces and emotions of human beings themselves. Children and old people came off best, and Sucksdorff confesses to a preference for them, next to animals, because they are so "purely themselves."

Sucksdorff, like Bergman both gentle and strong-willed, a sort of visual sensualist and moralist at the same time, also came from a strictly religious home. He was not permitted to dance, to see cinema or theater, could not even own a camera. As a student of theater direction in Germany he took his first pictures—and, as he told me with some pride, with his third photo he won first prize in a difficult competition. When he returned from Germany, he came bearing a movie camera.

With his first attempt at a full-length feature, *The Great Adventure* (Sandrews, 1951-53), Sucksdorff relates many of his earlier nature images to the world of two small boys, and the result, while not entirely integrated, is a tender picture which explores the tenuous alliance of children and animals and throbs with an awe of nature—a feeling which he says he has had since early childhood.

Sucksdorff's admiration for creatures "purely themselves" next took him to India where he lived with and filmed the Muria people, culminating finally in his *Jungle Saga* (1955-57, also Sandrews), released in the United States in 1960 as *The Flute and the Arrow* [see *Film Quarterly*, Winter, 1960]. An exciting short nature film he made in the 'forties, *A Divided World*, was also recently shown in the United States, running for a while with *The Virgin Spring* in New York.

After several years of film inactivity, Sucksdorff has just made *The Boy in the Tree* (1960), which departs radically from his previous efforts. To open in Sweden later in 1961, it is a Swedish-located aspect of the currently popular theme of amoral youth with nothing to do but seek destructive excitement. Mixed with the musical background of Bach, Beethoven,

and Handel is a jazz counterpoint for which Sucksdorff went all the way to New York (which he dislikes intensely), to composer Quincy Jones (whom he likes very much). Whether or not Sucksdorff has handled this theme, and his first professional cast (including Birgitte Petersson of *Virgin Spring*) in both a new and humanly dramatic way is a question many film people I talked with raised. Gunnar Fischer, the chief cameraman for the film and the first other than himself Sucksdorff has ever used, told me that despite certain difficulties, he felt Sucksdorff had very possibly succeeded. If so, perhaps the new era of Swedish dramatic films will include not only directors coming from the strong tradition of theater, but also men such as Sucksdorff who have worked from the beginning mainly in the film medium and are minimally influenced—for better and worse—by the techniques of the stage.

But through all the changes and upheavals that are occurring in Swedish film-making, one characteristic which would be most regrettably lost is its democratic sense of community. A feeling of working together rather than against each other pervades the atmosphere of both film and theater production in Sweden. The star system for all practical purposes does not exist; even—or perhaps above all—the director, who is in a sense the most important figure, must have a humility and sensitivity to his group—actors, cameraman, script-girl, technicians—which can inspire and maintain an integrity and unity of purpose. Bergman expressed something of this aspiration when he wrote (in *Films and Filming*, London) about the legendary rebuilding of Chartres: “All kinds of people came and together they began to build up the cathedral on its old site. They all stayed there until the building was completed—master builders, workers, artists, clowns, noblemen, priests, burghers. But they remained anonymous and no one knows to this day who built the cathedral of Chartres. . . . If thus I am asked what I should like to be the general purpose of my films, I would reply that I want to be one of

the artists in the cathedral on the great plain.” (Like Chartres, Bergman’s “cathedral” seems to loom lofty and alone when seen from the distance; closer, its gets a little lost in more mundane surroundings.)

Max von Sydow told me that people newly working with Bergman are often surprised at his taciturn gentleness in dealing with them. I too was impressed with this quality, seeing it in action (along with a rather stern moralism) when I made a careless—albeit true—observation about one of his co-workers for which Bergman rightly, firmly, but gently reprimanded me.

In his “Page from My Diary,” Bergman describes a chilly day in the shooting of *The Virgin Spring* when “it would have been an exaggeration to have called the atmosphere cheerful, but on the other hand we were not downhearted. All were caught up with that unique family feeling which is typical of film-making in Sweden.” He describes the sudden appearance of two cranes flying overhead; everyone drops his work to run and watch. In the back of his mind, apparently, he had been mulling over a comfortable offer from an American film company. “We returned to work in a happy mood, enchanted by this experience,” wrote Bergman. “Then this thought started playing on my mind: ‘. . . it would be very pleasant to have a camera track that was not buckled, a camera truck that does not creak, and it would be quite an event *just for once* to make a motion picture with a budget of over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. . . . However, despite all that I am turning the American offer down flat.’ I felt a sudden happiness and relief. I felt secure and at home.”

It is this family feeling which (together with a respect for individuality and art) characterizes the atmosphere of Swedish film-making and most strongly impresses the observer. Recently I was hailed in a telegraph office by Max von Sydow, who told me that he had not yet decided to accept an offer from Hollywood’s George Stevens to play Jesus “opposite” Liz Taylor’s Mary Magdalene. I could not help re-

flecting on the virtues of a society large enough to produce an actor of von Sydow's sensitivity and stature, yet small enough to enable him to remain human and thoughtful, and polite enough to leave him unassailed by mobs. When he does take his family off to Hollywood this fall, as is now scheduled, one can hope that he will have more of an effect on Hollywood than Hollywood on him; that has been arguably the case with at least one other Swede, Garbo.

The family feeling of film-making is supplemented by the fact that when a film is contemplated, a producer gets together with the director (or a director can bring his idea to the producer) and soon they are also discussing the film with the actors as well. Roles are sometimes written by the director—particularly Bergman—with certain actors in mind, but not as vehicles for “stars.” Björnstrand and von Sydow told me that they have never disliked a role Bergman had assigned them, although Björnstrand confesses he never did quite understand his part in *The Magician*.

In talking with actors, directors, producers, cameramen, I consistently felt the civilization and decency of these people, their sympathy with each other's problems, their sensitive understanding of the broader artistic aim of their efforts. Undoubtedly there are neuroses and petty jealousies underlying many relationships here, as anywhere, but one feels about most of the film community that they would not readily try to undercut each other, belittle each other's work, seek easy and cheap and sensational ways of achieving their effects. Simple and inexpensive and intriguing, yes; but they seem to find it difficult to turn to the extravagant or trick devices used so often by Hollywood with so little purpose. Gunnar Fischer, for example, a usually gentle and reticent man, is vehement and voluble when it comes to the double frame necessitated by the wide screen, a kind of imitation CinemaScope which Swedish film companies used very much during the 'fifties. “This was the biggest step backwards in film-making,” he told me. “Please write that, so people will know! Often the hands, which can



Harriet Andersson in Bergman's *GYCKLARNAS AFTON* (*Naked Night*), which moved from exploitation houses to art theaters.

be so expressive, must be cut off, there is useless space at the sides, furniture must be raised so that you get artificial disproportions, you can never get a clean close-up. It is really up to the projectionist whether or not the actors will have heads. I have often had to use the double frame in recent years, except for most of Bergman's films: Bergman himself now refuses to use it.” (It is now never used, in fact, according to Dr. Dymling.)

Cameraman Fischer's comments on his work with Bergman, Sucksdorff, and others (including Asquith and other non-Swedish directors) reflect the delicate feeling of mutual respect characteristic of those engaged in all aspects of the industry. In regard to Sucksdorff, Fischer told me that while it is difficult for a photographer to work for another photographer, he agreed generally with Sucksdorff's photographic directions, and feels he has a great visual sensitivity. Bergman, says Fischer, has perhaps more concern with the face, the eyes, the human being, but also has very definite ideas as to how he wants the camera, which he looks into frequently. “A good cameraman,” Fischer says, “must always consider that he is not playing first violin.” Fischer also expressed a few wistful longings that less consideration of economy might make his work easier; there is never enough time or materials, he says, but it is an industry too, after all, there is always some

compromise, and one cannot afford to do everything one wants.

The thing about American and English film production which most dismays Swedish filmmakers, on the other hand, is the excess of people and materials and time squandered. When a Swedish film is being made, the director, an actor, or anybody else can pick up a prop and move it anywhere it is needed without bringing the wrath of over-organized labor down on their heads. Actors sometimes direct, leading actors play bit parts, directors sometimes act and often write. There are not so many people standing around that one stumbles over them or has no idea who they are. There is not the frantic disjointed tension and temperament and pressure of heavy investment pushing them; yet there is often a tension of another sort, a creative and unifying kind of tension which carries them through the month or six weeks of shooting time usually taken for a Swedish film. It is almost a truism that they are forced by material limitations into considerations of art; on the other hand a preoccupation with art makes financial extravagances unnecessary and even undesirable.

The most of the films made in Sweden are little artistic and philosophical gems is of course far from the truth: Sweden also has its thrillers, its family comedies, its spectacles—some of these well done, some flops, some both. Such directors as Arne Mattson (*One Summer of Happiness*) and Hasse Ekman, have turned largely to light comedy and thrillers; Göran Gentele and Kenne Fant, more recent popular directors working with Europa and Nordisk Tonefilm, have perhaps been limited by what the recent market would bear in showing the full scope of their talents. Some of these directors also work in TV, some direct at the Opera (where Bergman also had a great success in directing Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* last season). Fant, of course, will now have a chance to show what he can do both artistically and financially as SF's new production chief. At present he is still engaged at Nordisk Tonefilm, which—either despite or because of the reces-

sion—is producing a large and expensive color spectacle on the order of *Around the World in 80 Days*. This will be *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, based on Selma Lagerlöf's delightful stories about the aerial adventures of Nils and his goose (well known also in the United States). A Swede's-eye view of Sweden's pleasant geography could be a refreshing addition to the collection—if it does not, on the other hand, turn out to be too little and too late. Tonefilm, which in the 'forties had Lorens Marmstedt starting off its production and Karl Kilbom—one of Sweden's most colorful old Socialists, now retired—as its president, has been headed since 1953 by Arne Elmgren, a journalist-economist who is another of the less artistically grounded few in Swedish film-making. The company is owned by the Folk Houses (union-run community centers which have their own theaters) and major Swedish coöperative, labor, and agricultural associations. These do not in any way affect the functions of the company, however, which like other Swedish film producers today must operate on closely calculated considerations of finance. Tonefilm produces as well as imports a number of comedies and thrillers, and is Swedish distributor for Disney films.

The story of Europa, second to SF in age though not second in production among Swedish film companies, is largely the story of one man, Gustav Scheutz, who started the company in 1930 and has been its owner, director, and production head ever since. In 1950 Scheutz was one of the three major Swedish producers who went to Hollywood (with Dymling and Waldekranz) at the invitation of the Motion Picture Association of America. Originally in the glass industry, Scheutz is a good businessman whose interest in films has led him chiefly to produce sprightly comedies—an example of which is *Three Wishes*, currently very successful in Sweden and, with Eva Dahlbeck in one of the leading roles, possibly due for an American showing. Tonefilm also had a successful comedy recently running for some time—*Wedding Day*, with Bibi Andersson and Max von Sydow.

In any discussion of Swedish film-making, even limiting it to recent years, one cannot overlook the name of director-actor Victor Sjöström. With Mauritz Stiller he gave Swedish films in the earliest days their artistic ambitions and orientation. When his own great era of silent film (which, like the more recent "golden years," also began during a war—World War I) had passed, with the intervention of recessions and shifts of Swedish film personnel to Hollywood, and with the development of the new Swedish cinema of the 'forties and 'fifties, Sjöström remained not only as a grand old monument of the past, but as a spirit still active in and pervading the film community and epitomized, perhaps, in his final scene as the old doctor in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. Perhaps more significantly than the advent of TV, Sjöström's death last year, and Dr. Dymling's death this spring, have marked the end of a great and productive half-century of Swedish film-making.

What can one learn from it? The reasons for the relative excellence of Sweden's films, in a country less populous than New York City, can perhaps be summed up in two phrases: regard for film as an art form, and a spirit of community. Not that Swedish producers object to making money, nor are they bad businessmen; but to paint a painting with the object of making it sell is quite another thing than to paint what one wants to express with the incidental hope that others will respond to it. In the medium of film-making, however, as Dr. Dymling put it, "the economic problem is born with the production." The investment of time, talents, and materials is sufficiently great and, as in theater, so directly dependent on an audience that financial considerations cannot be ignored at the start. Such men as Dymling, Marmstedt, Scheutz, and Waldekranz combined a practical sense of what was financially possible with an imaginative sense of what could and should be artistically possible. They brought to film-making experience in various other arts: Dymling headed Swedish Radio up to 1942, when he came to Svensk Filmindustri,

had a doctorate in history of literature and published studies on his original research on Shakespeare; Molander was chief of SF studios and a Ph.D. in arts; Waldekranz of Sandrews took his MA in history of literature and theater, and wrote extensively on cinema before becoming production chief at Sandrews in 1942.

Now Dymling is dead and a 38-year-old director has replaced him; Bergman has joined Sjöberg at the Royal Dramatic Theater and says he will make perhaps eight or ten more films before he is 50, then retire to work only in the theater; Sucksdorff is trying a realm new to him; few other personalities seem likely to emerge. Sweden is a small country, as the Swedes keep saying, and increasingly open to the cultural and financial invasions of the world—particularly of the United States. American influences on Swedish youth are everywhere evident; teen-agers can be seen on the streets in boots, black leather jackets, and duck-tail haircuts; they ride around in jointly owned cars picking up girls; and most of them go to the movies.

What Sweden can salvage from its peaceful isolation and democratic "neutrality," and what role its film-makers will play in the years ahead, is still to be seen. One can hope that something of the spirit of its "golden years" of film-making will remain.

A Note on Back Issues

Many back numbers of the *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* (our predecessor) and the *Hollywood Quarterly* (its predecessor) are still available from the University of California Press, Berkeley 4, California, at \$1.25 per copy. Arrangements have also been made to provide copies of out-of-print issues on microfilm or in xerograph facsimile copies from University Microfilms, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.